The Sun Rises Slowly by Bellicose Blue

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Summary: He killed a monster, but not the one he wanted.

The Sun Rises Slowly

A/N: Because I have a lot of feelings about Steve.

The days afterward are easy. He's popular, always has been, and he's no stranger to shaking hands with wolves even when he'd rather let them rip his throat out. So he talks and he charms and he smiles until his teeth crack and no one ever asks him if he's okay.

He's not, of course. It's hard to lie to himself at night when every shadow is a monster just out of reach and every noise is a warning for an attack that never comes. He's so on guard for the world to turn upside down around him that he forgets to watch out for himself.

They come in waves, the thoughts do. It starts with a whisper, *they like your brother better* or maybe *you'll never be anything*, and it isn't fun, of course it isn't, not with the needle-sharp teeth the words dig into his skin, but he can ignore them by now. He's worn these calluses for years. It's the ones that come later that drive him upright, matted sheets bunched around him as he fumbles for something, anything, to beat the voices away. It's murmurs of *they don't want you here* and *you should be dead instead of her* and *she loves him, not you, never you.*

The worst part is, they're right.

He might spend half an hour styling his hair in the morning, and his essays might come back dripping red like his hands in his dreams, and he might have as much ambition in his whole body as Nancy does in a single manicured finger, but he's not stupid, not really. He knows who he is. He knows what he is.

Weak.

Scared.

Unworthy.

Because the truth is: he's not a good person. He's not even a nice one.

He fell in love, but it didn't fix him, didn't claw deep down to the hole in his chest wide enough to fit a star through, didn't make him anything but jealous for someone else instead of himself. He might tell himself that it wasn't him, it was Tommy who painted Nancy red for the town to see and laughed, but he didn't do anything about it. He cleaned it up when it was done and the guilt had set in, swept all that hatred under the rug like it had never existed, but he still let it happen in the first place.

It scares him to remember just how cruel he can be, how far he'll let himself go before he reels back from the edge. On the nights when the memories are too strong, when he feels skin give way beneath his fists and sees a minefield of photographs scatter to the floor, that's when he reminds himself that he's not the hero of this story. He never was.

It's almost comforting, in a way. There's nowhere for him to go but up. He certainly can't get any worse.

When the daylight comes, he'll be stronger this time, he will. He'll slip on his mask of arrogance and shove everything else so deep down it'll only leak out at night. And he'll hold Nancy in his arms and pretend her lips are absolution and maybe, someday, everything will be okay.

Until then, he watches the window and waits for the sun to rise.